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# News Release



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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to reintroduce two fishes

As part of a broad effort to restore threatened and endangered species in the Tennessee River system, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is planning to reintroduce two native fishes – the threatened spotfin chub and endangered boulder darter – into Shoal Creek (a tributary to the Tennessee River), which flows through Lauderdale County, Alabama, and Lawrence County, Tennessee.

The reintroduced fishes will be designated as “nonessential experimental” populations, under the Endangered Species Act. This classification precludes anyone who accidentally kills or harms the fish from being in violation of the law, provided that the “take” occurs as part of an otherwise lawful activity. Similarly, federal or federally funded projects would not be required to be altered or stopped to protect these fish.

“By reintroducing experimental populations of these species into their historical habitat, and promoting other recovery efforts, we hope to improve the species’ status to the point where they no longer need Endangered Species Act protection,” said Sam D. Hamilton, the Service’s Southeast Regional Director.

These proposed reintroductions are part of a major effort by multiple partners – including federal and state agencies, conservation groups, and private landowners – to restore and recover native species in the Tennessee River system.

Conservation Fisheries, Inc., a nonprofit fish conservation organization based in Knoxville, Tennessee, has been working on several efforts in the Tennessee River system including:

- reintroducing the spotfin chub and three other species into Abrams Creek in Blount County;
- augmenting boulder darter populations in the Elk River; and,
- reintroducing the spotfin chub and three other federally-listed species into the Tellico River.

“The nonessential experimental population designation for Shoal Creek is the next step in recovery efforts of the boulder darter and spotfin chub,” said Gary Myers, Executive Director of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. “Coupled with habitat improvements and advances in fish propagation technology, this nonessential experimental population designation will allow efforts to re-establish viable populations of boulder darters and spotfin chubs into Shoal Creek. This designation will certainly assist our recovery efforts for these rare fish.”

Support for Conservation Fisheries, Inc.’s reintroduction efforts has come from the Service, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, The Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, and the Tennessee Aquarium. The reintroduction effort in Shoal Creek, an extension of these other recovery projects, was developed at the request of the Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Executive Director of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

The spotfin chub was once found throughout the middle and upper reaches of the Tennessee River system, but now occurs in only a few Tennessee River tributaries. This small fish grows to three and a half inches, has a life span of less than four years, and inhabits moderate-to-large streams with pools and stretches of choppy water.

Although boulder darters were once thought to exist only in the Elk River system and Shoal Creek, scientists believe they also inhabited shoals in the Tennessee River and its larger tributaries in Tennessee and Alabama from the Paint Rock River in Madison County, Alabama, downstream to at least Shoal Creek in Lauderdale County, Alabama. Today, the fish no longer survives in Shoal Creek and exists only in the Elk River system in Giles and Lincoln Counties, Tennessee, and Limestone County, Alabama. This fish, generally less than 3 inches long, lives in relatively shallow, swift water and is generally associated with boulder and large rock habitat.

Both species were last collected from Shoal Creek in the 1880s but were apparently unable to survive there later, due to pollution of the water and construction of Wilson Dam. However, as the result of the Clean Water Act – as well as pollution control measures undertaken by State water and natural resources agencies, municipalities, industries, and individuals – the creek’s water quality has greatly improved and its fish have benefited.

Nonessential experimental population status is a special category under the Endangered Species Act. It allows for reintroduction and protection with less stringent requirements than for species not in this category.

For example, for nonessential experimental populations, the Act requires that a federal agency outside a National Wildlife Refuge or National Park confer with the Service on actions the agency finds likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the reintroduced species. But the agency is not required by the Act to halt or change an action – although it would be required to do so for a federally threatened or endangered species that is not a nonessential experimental population. The Service, therefore, does not expect the reintroductions to have an impact on these agencies or their activities.

These less stringent rules ensure that in the event of any accidental and incidental killing or injuring of these reintroduced fish – provided that the “take” occurs as part of an otherwise lawful activity – there would be no violation of the Act. For instance, if a person inadvertently kills a reintroduced species while engaged in an otherwise lawful activity such as boating, fishing, or wading, then no violation is considered to have been committed.

“Because of the significant regulatory relief provided through this nonessential experimental population designation, we do not believe that these reintroductions will hinder public use of Shoal Creek or its watershed,” Hamilton said.

Questions regarding these reintroductions should be addressed to Timothy Merritt at the Tennessee Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 446 Neal Street, Cookeville, Tennessee 38501, telephone 931/528-6481, Ext. 211, fax 931/528-7075.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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